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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 001512

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: A LARSEN VISIT: CONFIDENT SARG UNLIKELY TO BUDGE

REF: A. DAMASCUS 1511

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 0625

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: As consideration continues of a trip by UN special envoy for 1559 implementation Terje Roed Larsen to Damascus, the prospects for success seem dubious from our perspective, primarily because of SARG confidence about its prospects in Lebanon and its overall regional position. That confidence will color how the Syrians respond to a Larsen request to visit Damascus and how they address the substantive issues he is likely to raise, including border demarcation, removal of President Lahoud, and establishing diplomatic relations. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) RESURGENCE OF SYRIAN INFLUENCE IN LEBANON: At present, the SARG feels emboldened by a resurgence of its influence in Lebanon and heartened by the way its allies there have taken the offensive against PM Siniora and his March 14 allies. The recent hostile tone evident in the Syrian press, directed at Siniora and attacking his nationalist credentials by questioning his position on "the resistance," as well as reports of a Syrian subpoena issued for Walid Jumblatt, Marwan Hamadeh, and journalist Fares Khashan (ref A), also point to a more intransigent Syria that senses its Lebanese opponents are on the defensive and weakening by the day.

[1](#)3. (C) AN EMBOLDENED SYRIA IN THE REGION: This SARG confidence in Lebanon has been shored up by a sense that regional developments are furthering its interests across the board. Its burgeoning relations with Iran, the marked decrease in pressure from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Hamas' taking power in the Palestinian territories, ongoing violence in Iraq, an internal crackdown that has an anemic opposition completely cowed, and a sense, albeit diminished, that new-UNIIIC chief Brammertz poses less of a threat than Mehlis, all these factors have emboldened the regime (ref B).

Hard-liners who advocated hanging tough and offering no concessions feel vindicated. None of these developments is likely to provide the SARG with any long-term shelter from its international isolation, but for the next month or two (until the release of the mid-June Brammertz report), and certainly during the time-frame for any Larsen visit, the SARG is likely to remain intoxicated by its current sense of triumph and is unlikely to show any flexibility.

[1](#)4. (C) REGIME'S CALCULATIONS ABOUT RECEIVING LARSEN: In this frame of mind, the regime is unlikely to give Larsen anything that might be seen as a benefit for Siniora and the

despised March 14 group. However, the SARG will consider very carefully its tactics, including whether to agree to a Larsen visit, whether to allow a meeting with Asad, and to what degree it should try to shape the agenda in advance. We conclude that the SARG will receive him if he asks to come, if only to avoid any subsequent claim that Damascus has refused to fully comply with its obligations under 1559.

15. (C) On the other hand, the SARG may calculate that although Larsen will likely come with a tough message, it will remain private for the most part, and they will be free to spin the visit in the media as evidence that Syria is not isolated and that it is the key regional player in Lebanon, whose views must be taken into account. The SARG will also carefully calculate potential fallout at the UNSC over Larsen's report, likely wagering that a new, harsh resolution is unlikely (given Russian opposition), but that a weaker one or a PRST is possible, neither of which could be used to pressure Syria as UNSCR 1559 was used. Finally, overall regime calculations are colored by SARG desires not to respond prematurely but to use the Lebanon card as part of its strategic hand, to pressure the U.S. to re-engage on terms more favorable to Syrian interests.

16. (C) BORDER DEMARCATION SEEN AS TRAP FOR HIZBALLAH: On the substance, the SARG is not likely to show any real flexibility, although it may try to stall and avoid the appearance of outright intransigence. It will view any Larsen demand that it agree to demarcate the border with Lebanon as a transparent trap designed to corner its strategic ally Hizballah into disarming. While it may agree to time-consuming, dead-end preparatory measures such as referring the issue to a joint committee (the Lebanon-Syria Higher Council has already been examining the issue in

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desultory fashion for months, according to our contacts here), it will not allow itself to be boxed in on the demarcation issue. To counter Larsen, SARG officials will point to the occupied status of Sheba'a farms, insisting that the area is impossible to demarcate as long as it remains that way. If Larsen tries to use the recently held National Dialogue as an argument for Syrian movement (in tandem with the international consensus that border issues should be treated bilaterally), SARG officials are likely to point to the late-developing Hizballah-Aoun position that the issue should be referred to the UN rather than be treated bilaterally. The SARG would have to be under intense international pressure to move on this issue, since it would also fear that making border adjustments might impact on any future negotiations (and border adjustments) with Israel, and evidence does not point to that level of pressure at present.

17. (C) STILL BACKING LAHOUD: Regarding the removal of Lahoud, the SARG is also likely to be intransigent, although it could package that view as a willingness to consider alternatives but insist on a veto, essentially arrogating to itself the right to name Lebanon's new president. It would then reject any of Larsen's potential candidates and put forward a few unacceptable figures viewed as transparent shills for Damascus, such as former FM Jean Obeid. Given the regime's current confidence level, it is doubtful Asad would agree in the end to dump Lahoud, seeing it as unnecessary and as a dangerous signal of abandonment and weakness to its proxies there and to its allies and rivals in the region.

18. (C) NO DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS LIKELY: The SARG is also highly unlikely to agree to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon. This issue is generally viewed as a non-starter here, inside the regime, as well as among elites and on even the street, where the regime has succeeded in the past year in whipping up powerful anti-Lebanon sentiments, using issues like mistreatment of Syrian workers and the "insulting" lack of appreciation by the Lebanese for the "sacrifices" Syria made to stabilize Lebanon. Except among

the small secular opposition, there is little appreciation for the fact that Syria occupied and essentially despoiled Lebanon for three decades. The regime has also succeeded in portraying this issue as one of outside interference, where the West and Israel are seen as attempting to wrest Lebanon away from its natural Syrian orbit and force it under the domination of powers hostile to Syria. Moving on this issue, as on the others, would be seen as offering a present to Siniora and his allies at a time the SARG feels no compulsion or desire to do so, and when its perceived interests point in the opposite direction, towards finding additional ways to punish and pressure the recalcitrants opposing Syrian influence in Lebanon. The regime is almost certain to rebuff any Larsen effort to raise the issue of arms shipments to Hizballah or the Palestinians, denying any involvement.

19. (C) COMMENT: A Larsen visit to Damascus offers the possibility of limited benefits, principal among them the prospect (somewhat slim in our judgment) that Larsen while in Damascus will publicly accuse the SARG of failing to meet its obligations under 1559. Conversely, it also may offer the SARG a momentary opportunity to demonstrate that its isolation has eased and allow it to spin the visit to show that its role as the dominant regional player in Lebanon is being acknowledged. Given current SARG calculations, however, such a visit offers little promise of movement on the substantive issues.

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